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Meals have long been a topic of key interest in the field of early Christian studies, including the field of New Testament studies. The reasons for this can be found both in early Christian writings themselves, as they are quite preoccupied with meals and the dynamics proper to them, such as inclusion and exclusion and the structuring of a community, and in the role that meals have played and continue to play in the history of Christianity: Christianity is a meal-centered religion, given that the Eucharist (under whichever name) is a central act of worship in all large traditions (even if it is celebrated infrequently, this is often due to awe for the celebration rather than to disinterest in this meal). Celebrations of meals in the history of Christianity and today have been and continue to be legitimized by appeals to early Christian texts, especially canonical ones, that are concerned with meals. In being so preoccupied with meals, Christianity, as it originates in Judaism, mirrors human preoccupation with food and meals at large – as anthropologists such as Mary Douglas have shown, meals are not important primarily because they are a way of receiving nutrition (there are more efficient ways of taking in calories and the like than a meal), but because they shape relationships and are an important means for structuring a community and positioning this community in the wider world. When studying early Christian meals in the Greco-Roman world (thereby including the Jewish subculture), this also becomes apparent: meals are never just meals, they are always more than merely a way of taking in food.

In the past approximately 20 years, research about the evolving Christian identity and the basic communal practices of the first Christian communities has been renewed fundamentally by studying these in relation to Greco-Roman meals. In the first half of the twentieth century early Christian communities and their worship and ritual meals were especially examined against Jewish or pagan backgrounds, from the middle of the twentieth century early Christian meals were primarily understood as an integral part of Jewish-Hellenistic practice. This resulted in an embedding of emerging Christianity in the Hellenistic world, which has influenced and changed the study of early Christian meals accordingly. Leading in the change of paradigm of meal studies were mainly scholars from Germany and the United States (see the overview in: Taussig: 2009). In research into early Christian meals, the publication of Dennis E. Smith's *From Symposium to Eucharist* in 2003 (based on his 1992 PhD thesis) and Matthias Klinghardt's 1996 *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft* a veritable paradigm shift occurred. From primarily genealogically oriented studies that usually assumed

a number of distinct meal traditions in the ancient world (e.g. Greek and Jewish, with early Christian meals as a mixture of both) and that was focused on the shape of ritual and matters of theological interpretation, the focus shifted to a view of meals in the Greco-Roman world that was more encompassing and had a broader scope when it came to positioning all of these meals in Greco-Roman society. The Smith/Klinghardt paradigm simply says: throughout the Mediterranean world, a coherent meal culture can be found, with meals that were structured in a similar way to a large extent and, even more importantly, that were discussed and evaluated according to a common frame of reference. Rather than attributing a particular meal tradition to a particular (sub)culture, it appeared to make more sense to view all kinds of meals as variations on a theme.

Support for this view was found in a plethora of sources, but a particularly eloquent one is probably Philo of Alexandria's *De vita contemplativa*, where Philo proceeds to compare the philosophical culture of the Greek to his own Therapeutes on the basis of their way of banqueting: 'I wish also to speak of their common assemblies, and their very cheerful meetings at convivial parties, setting them in opposition and contrast to the banquets of others' (40), in what follows, Philo compares the meals involved, notably Plato's Symposium and the meals of the Therapeutes, on a point-by-point basis, thereby proving the superiority of his own group. Although Plato (or contemporary Platonists) would have doubtlessly repaid the compliment in kind, this way of arguing is exemplary for what the new paradigm concerning early Christian meals emphasizes. Meals can be compared across (sub)cultures in the ancient world, the ancients did so themselves, and in doing so, they were arguing about the quality of communities, how these should be organized and what values were embodied by them or ought to be embodied by them. In a way, one can speak of a broad 'theology of meals', which reflects critically on the way in which meals represent and embody different kinds of life in communion and the values inherent to them. On a meta-level, such values would be broadly shared, yet, they were always interpreted and applied in the context of particular traditions and contexts.

A good example is when Paul refers to the kingdom of God being characterized by δικαιοσύνη καὶ εἰρήνη καὶ χαρὰ ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ (Rom. 14.17). The three values of righteousness (justice), peace and joy would be acceptable to most people, yet his de-emphasizing of food might raise some eyebrows (some foods were regarded as 'nobler' or 'more pure' than others, of course), while the source of these values, i.e. the Holy Spirit, is very particular and potentially controversial. Such controversy would also arise when a meal was celebrated in remembrance of someone who had been crucified under Roman Imperial rule, but was venerated as Lord by a community, which also derived its values from this Lord. In other words: although all these meals can be seen as variations on a common theme, these variations do matter a lot! Research in the footsteps of Smith, to whom this volume is also dedicated, and Klinghardt, have shown this in much detail and in relation to a plethora of early Jewish, including early Christian, texts.

The broader classification of early Christian meals in their actual context, the Greco-Roman world as a whole (not only in the Jewish environment, or merely in the context of mystery religions), and in their peculiarity (not only as a precursor to the Mass)

from the mid-1990s resulted, however, in that the specific literary, philosophical and theological characteristics of individual texts and their contexts were not sufficiently analysed, given that all emphasis was placed on the social aspects of meals. This research has now come to a point where the collection, systematization and fuse of the insights and results, including theological insights and results, have become a necessity. In addition, the particular work on a wide range of texts from the Imperial Period in the direct interest of an interdisciplinary communication of the results and insights was due to come.

This interdisciplinary handbook studies the question of whether the motive of the common meal can be understood as a hermeneutical key to understanding literary and theological concepts about the origins of Christianity. It provides a comprehensive analysis of the relevant sources, offering insights into their literary, social and religious aspects, and thus combining the scholarly perspectives that have been developed in relation to early Christian meals over the last decades. To study meals as a literary motive is an aim to allow insight of selected writings for the interested reader and invites the experienced theologian to engage in a more sophisticated analysis. The handbook reflects this differentiated reading in its outline. Selected texts are first introduced and interpreted as a whole regarding the meal as a literary motive; second, each author is asked to analyse one aspect of the theme that is particularly relevant. To cover more systematic themes, the authors are asked to focus on a canon of questions that are relevant in understanding the Greco-Roman meal practice. The questions cover topics like: How does gender matter at meals? Where does politics become relevant? Is it possible to examine religious formations of monotheism and polytheism during the meal? How is sacrifice understood in different meal practices? Is inclusion and exclusion a social dynamic of power struggles? Where does ethnicity matter? How can we interpret the meal within a distinctive space or time? How did collegia understand the significance of their meal practices? The authors will thereby base their interpretation of individual aspects of the meal as a literary motive on an analysis that precedes the consolidation.

Subdivided into six categories, dealing with representative texts from the intellectual milieu of early Christianity, gospel literature, various acts, epistolary literature, apocalyptic literature and texts related to everyday life, the volume offers a broad overview of which meals matter to what communities in what way, while balancing presentations of extant scholarly knowledge with new insights and proposals.

In the chapter 'Authors and Collections' Maria Sokolskaya studies Philo of Alexandria and reflects on the banquets that appear in *De vita contemplativa*. Josephus and his description of the Essene common meals are interpreted by William den Hollander. In reference to the observation that scholars often offer 'meagre information from the Qumran texts with selected data from written sources by Philo or Josephus', (§§§) Claudia Bergmann focuses on the literary texts from Qumran and the descriptions of communal meals in particular before any socio-historical conclusions are made. Matthias Becker asks if Plutarch's *Septem sapientium convivium* is an example of Greco-Roman sympotic literature. Texts from Nag Hammadi, namely the Codex VI that includes three hermetic texts (VI.6–8) (the untitled, so-called 'Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth' (NHC VI.6), the 'Prayer of Thanksgiving' (VI.7) and, 'Asclepius' (VI.8)) are examined by Jan Heilmann. Also focusing on a collection, Andrew McGowan studies

meals as a literary motive in the Apostolic Fathers. He surveys Barnabas, 1 and 2 Clement, the Didache, the Letter to Diognetus, the Shepherd of Hermas and the Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians. McGowan gives particular attention to the meals with the corpus of Ignatius of Antioch. Eric Ottenheijm reflects on Rabbinic texts and the question of how material context and rhetoric intertwine.

The gospel tradition is covered by Martin Ebner's chapter on the Gospel of Mark with the focus on the Meal of the Feast of the 'Unleavened (bread)' and the 'Leaven' in Mark 14. Matthias Klinghardt's contribution is on the Gospel of Luke. He shows how the literary discussion of the meal contributes to social formations. The Gospel of Matthew, as a gospel within the diaspora context, is discussed by Hal Taussig. Esther Kobel is interested in meal scenes and metaphorical talk about food and drink in the Fourth Gospel. This part of the handbook concludes with Silke Petersen's reflection on the Apocryphal Gospels. Her interpretation of so-called gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi reflects a surprisingly infrequent account of Eucharistic meals.

The chapter on acts includes the Acts of the Apostles, apocryphal acts and Joseph and Aseneth (as it uses a similar literary format). Due to the narrative character of the Jewish-Hellenistic novel in which Joseph meets Aseneth during his travels through Egypt (Gen. 41.47-49), the handbook reflects on the literary importance of meal scenes in that particular literary context. Dennis Smith, to whom the handbook is dedicated, reflects the close connection between a novel and acts:

> The overall genre of Acts is most closely related to ancient historical novels (Pervo 2008: 170). The author creates a literary world that utilizes historical figures and some historical data, but the story he tells follows his own literary agenda. He is an accomplished writer and utilizes a variety of sub-genres and literary motifs throughout his narrative. In this essay, we will explore how meals function as a literary motif in Acts and what they reveal about the larger literary world that Acts is creating. (this volume, §§§)

For him, meals as literary motives were embedded in the social reality and vice versa. Therefore, Acts 2.42-47 is interpreted as a story that describes an idealized community of the distant past. Jan Bremmer and Annette Merz discuss the meal scenes in apocryphal Acts, namely the Acts of John and Andrew (Bremmer) and the Acts of Paul (Merz). They describe a genre that develops early Christian theology and corresponds with the literary interest in meals with novels, like Joseph and Asenath, and epistolary literature.

The chapter on epistolary literature begins with the reflection on the letters of Paul to the Corinthians (Soham Al-Suadi) and to the Romans (Kathy Ehrensperger). For the letters to the Corinthians, Paul makes use of the well-known characteristics of the Hellenistic meal to convey his Christology by introducing Jesus as the symposiarch of the meal. In Romans, on the other hand, Paul is evaluating the relationship between Israel and the nations in light of the Christ-event and Ehrensperger reconsiders Rom. 14.1–15.13 beyond the dichotomy between Jews and non-Jews. In the pseudepigraphic letters of Paul, Soham Al-Suadi observes that a shared meal performance stands in relation to shared scriptures. Jan Heilmann is reflecting on the implicit literary motive

of the meal in the Johannine letters. The so-called Catholic Epistles and their interest in 'the growing predominance of the word-orientated symposium over the food-orientated meal' (§§§) are evaluated by Hans-Joachim Stein. Gabriella Gelardini is reflecting on food metaphors in Hebrews.

Apocalyptic literature as a genre, that answers to a theological crisis, portrays meal scenes in a particular way. Peter-Ben Smit illustrates that 4 Ezra is provoked by the destruction of Jerusalem and includes the occurrence of meals, foodstuffs and food-related symbolism in the apocalyptic setting. Similarly, Markus Öhler elaborates on how the Apocalypse of John makes use of meals on a 'metaphorical manner and presents his vision of the future by means of images of meals from both the Old Testament and Jewish tradition and Greco-Roman banqueting culture' (§§§).

As pointed out by many authors of the handbook, the representative texts from the intellectual milieu of early Christianity, gospel literature, various acts, epistolary literature and apocalyptic literature strengthen their theological, political and social arguments through metaphorical and non-metaphorical representation of meals and foodstuffs. Magical and medical texts as well as inscriptions are literary genres of daily life, which have been underestimated in their relevance for early Christian identity formations in relation to meals. Monika Amsler is discussing the definition of the term 'magic' as well as relevance of foodstuff rituals that stand for a common life in the Papyri graecae magicae. John Wilkins shows that food and nutrition were crucial to wellbeing in Antiquity and that 'wellbeing of the body was a matter for sympotic reflection as was the wellbeing of the soul' (§§§). The chapter on texts related to everyday life ends with Lillian I. Larsen's and Jesper Blid's paper on inscriptions. They show how material 'texts' have played an important role in situating the idealized literary community.

The current volume thus adds to extant literature on early Christian meals, which consists of monographs dedicated to a particular topic, collections of essays resulting from the joint study of a topic and generally aimed at fellow specialists, and broad surveys and introductions to the field of meal studies by presenting the most relevant texts and textual corpora in sequence and by presenting them all in one place. This leads not just to a useful survey, but also to a further demonstration of the heuristic usefulness of the Smith/Klinghardt paradigm and to the scope of the variations on the theme of the meal (or banquet) in the ancient world. No meal is ever just a meal, nor can one say that all meals are the same just because they are meals. Each author (or community) seems to take pride in a particular way of celebrating meals and thereby performing and embodying their own identity, positioning themselves within broader society, dealing with questions of inclusion and exclusion and the division of roles within a community.

The volume is dedicated to the memory of Dennis E. Smith (1942–2017), the nestor of contemporary meal research in early Christianity, who passed away prior to the publication of this volume, but who is represented in it with an essay on the (canonical) Acts of the Apostles. May his memory be a blessing!